



New Perspectives on Philanthropy

Two books shine new light on the intricacies of giving.

By Terrence Fernsler

Charity, Philanthropy and Civility in American History

Edited by Lawrence J. Friedman & Mark D. McGarvie. 479 pages. Hardcover. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, www.cup.org.

Many of today's philanthropic dilemmas have historical counterparts, as this provocative book makes clear. Each of the book's poignant essays looks at a different aspect or age of philanthropy.

Early American philanthropists were quite paternalistic. In the decades after the Civil War, charity shifted from an individualistic to a bureaucratic philanthropy. This bureaucratic style led to the attempted conformity of recipients, with quite a bit of success. Missionary philanthropy after the Civil War became a tool of American imperialism; the philanthropists wanted the recipients to become like them.

During the Cold War, this missionary fervor became the drive to spread capitalism. Some important foundations were swept into this fanaticism; many of their programs were launched more because of the strategic significance of the recipient country than the viability of the programs' outcomes. As a consequence, many people grew wary of institutional philanthropy. The result is that today's donors investigate organizations much more thoroughly to be sure that recipients' needs are being met.

As philanthropy became more centralized, donors' say in how their contributions were used decreased. Opportunities for direct involvement became more difficult as professional organizers took on more of the workload. Of late, however, there's a movement

toward letting donors specify their preferences.

At the end of the 20th century, philanthropy was dramatically different from what it had been 50

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years earlier. Huge new fortunes shifted the balance of power from philanthropic institutions to wealthy people; commercial activities increased; and increasing philanthropy by evangelical religious groups diminished the significance of tax-based incentives for giving.

A question that reoccurs throughout the book is whether institutional philanthropy, tied as it is to the strings of the existing order, can accomplish anything of importance in building a better society. This question is as important today as ever. One historian wonders if organized philanthropy shouldn't provide a stabilizing effect on unrestrained capitalism.

Helping others can knit society together or pull it apart. Without direct mutual bonds between givers and recipients, philanthropy sacrifices effectiveness and moral purpose. Organized philanthropy can't substitute for the urge for personal service. And yet charitable acts, born of hunger for personal

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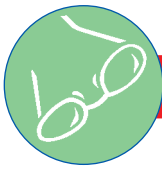
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connection, have been left out of most academic historical accounts of philanthropy. To perpetuate that omission is to undermine the study of helping others. When the focus is mainly on institutions of philanthropy, history is distorted, and so are the lessons to be learned from it.

Each expert in this book focuses on a historical specialty in relation to charity. For example, one shows that, although institutional philanthropy took hold after the Civil War, the stage was set for it much earlier with an 1819 Supreme Court decision (*Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*) which established a legal model for philanthropic pursuits. Another shows how the philanthropic activities of women helped win legal benefits, promote social change, shape government, and create the welfare state.

The last chapter makes a fascinating comparison of philanthropy in the U.S. and Europe. Many Americans believe that a philanthropic impulse has the potential to resolve most of the problems they face. Europeans have long believed that charity and philanthropy are far too modest to address the array of issues confronting civil society.

This book does us a service by putting the nonprofit sector in historical perspective. It's impossible

to read it without confronting many important questions about the work we do.

Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary To Give

By Julie Salamon. 183 pages. Hardcover. New York, NY: Workman Publishing Company, www.workman.com.

In American society today, it's easy to forget that generosity is larger and more important than just the transference of money. Generosity is part of aiming for a more just world.

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In this eloquent book, Julie Salamon looks at how people give. She raises issues of trust, reluctance, responsibility, motive, and boundaries, helping us understand our own comfort level with these issues.

She relies on the teachings of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, or Rambam, as he was known. Rambam was a 12th century physician, philosopher, and scholar. Perhaps his most important idea in the pursuit of righteousness was how to give with compassion and

common sense. He prescribed an eight-step program for giving, known as the ladder of charity.

His ladder consists of rungs in descending order, from most to least worthy, from idealism to realism, from helping the poor become self-sufficient down to giving in a grudging way. Salamon discusses the rungs one by one, illustrating each level with apt anecdotes and raising intriguing questions at each rung. As Rambam did, she attempts to make order out of the chaos of giving and help turn it into a transformation. In the process, she reminds us that people are at different steps of generosity — and that nonprofits are at different levels of asking. To serve our stakeholders well, we must come to understand where our organizations fit within the giving continuum.

The challenge for nonprofits is to help people in a capitalistic and materialistic society understand that, in the end, we're all measured not by what we have but what we give. That understanding will help supporters move up the ladder of charity. ■

Terrence Fernsler is development director for Columbia-Pacific Resource Conservation and Economic Development District in Montesano, Washington.



Nonprofit briefs

Nonprofits Lack Innovation, Survey Finds

Organizational bureaucracy is preventing nonprofits from being as innovative as they could or should be, according to a report by nfpSynergy. The survey found that only 20% of staff felt that innovation was important to their organization, citing fear of risk and being too caught up in operational duties as the main factors preventing innovative strategies. On the other hand, 60% of chief executives believed that innovation was an essential part of their organization. The report looks at the importance of generating innovation through vision, values, and strategy and explains how to inspire the whole organization to follow suit (see www.nfpsynergy.net/innovation.html, or e-mail reports@nfpsynergy.net for a free copy of the report). □